

Over Niagara in a Barrel

Painters take risks when they make paintings. If, when you look at a painting, you track backwards and forwards along the painting process you can see where they have made those key risky decisions. For many painters, however strategic their thinking, however acrobatic their decision making, there comes a moment when they have to nail themselves into the barrel, trust to luck and instinct and the gods of painting, and roll out into the fast current that carries them toward the edge of the waterfall.

There are, of course, a whole host of decisions that are made well in advance of the first brush mark but the moment the brush is loaded and poised above the canvas a different order of decision-making comes into play.

There is a lovely bit of film footage made by François Campaux in 1946 of the provisional positioning of Matisse's brush as it hovers just above the canvas, seeking not only the best place to make the mark but also the speed with which to make it and the pressure and angle and inflection too. Speeded up on film the brush appears to make a series of swordplay-like feints before committing itself to the final mark-making act. These feints are surely the conscious mind of the painter being tugged at by some other urge as the painter feels his way towards his image.

The gap between intention and execution is the moment for fluid decisionmaking. This is the zone of subconscious promptings, often indistinct, more felt than consciously determined, where wayward impulses can urge a painter to do the opposite of what is expected. Sometimes even the opposite of what is required. To signal left and turn right. To do a reverse jump. Or a double reverse jump. Where they can undermine the expected order of things. Not because painters are inherently revolutionaries, but because it is a way of testing the limits of their medium and, where paint acts as a mediator of perception, through that to test out something of the perceived world too.

One of the pleasures of looking at painting is looking out for artistic changes of mind - signalled by over-painting, erasure, abrasion and cancellation. It is very difficult to eliminate all trace of change, sometimes the full effect of a painting is only gained through the layering of change over change. All painters like pentimenti, those bits of underpainting revealed through time and the natural thinning of paint in old paintings, that show where the artist had a change of mind. It humanises them somehow, and removes the distance of history.

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If paintings can be said to have an internal life, if they are more than the sum of shapes on the surface, then that life is made legible through those decisions that the painter has made or, equally importantly, chosen not to make in constructing the painting. These decisions can be signposted as significant choices made at a crossroads, or they can be discerned as the residues of a change of mind but they are never without consequences.

These testing decisions give the work a density, not necessarily a density of materials, of thickened paint, but a density in interpretation and possibility. It is demanding of the viewer as well; when the painter heads towards the edge the viewer is invited to come too.

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